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ABSTRACT

The "Focus on Basics" serial concerns adult Learning and literacy. The eight short articles in this theme issue are all devoted to the topic of "learner motivation": (1) "Power, Literacy, and Motivation" (Greg Hart); (2) "The First Three Weeks: A Critical Time for Motivation" (B. Allan Quigley); (3) "Build Motivation by Building Learner Participation" (Barbara Garner); (4) "Staying in a Literacy Program" (Archie Willard); (5) "Stopping Out, Not Dropping Out" (Alisa Belzer); (6) "Where Attendance Is Not a Problem" (Moira Lucey); (7) "Getting into Groups" (Michael Pritza); and (8) "Focus on Research: NCSALL (National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy)'s Learner Motivation Study." Contains a list of 14 resources and NCSALL's website address. (KC)

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ED 418 262

Focus on Basics

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Power, Literacy, and Motivation

by Greg Hart

"Will you support the construction of an adult education center on the south side of Tucson? Please answer YES or NO." Lina Prieto, working on her GED, the single mother of two sons, put the question to each city council member and each county supervisor as they stepped up to the microphone. It was September, 1996, and 2,000 people in the auditorium waited for each to answer. An occasional "grito" (shout) rose up out of the crowd. Even the children waited intently beside their parents, aware that something unusual was happening. Signs demanding support for adult education lined the huge room at the Tucson Convention Center and bobbed above the crowd. The politicians stepped up to the microphone one at a time to answer her. "Yes!" "Yes!" "Yes!" Eleven times "Yes!", eleven times a huge eruption of shouting from the crowd, and on the last "Yes!" we rose to our feet and raucously celebrated victory. We — immigrants, drop outs, single mothers on welfare, minimum-wage workers, under-paid part-time adult educators — hugged one another, waved our

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Focus on Basics is the quarterly publication of the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy. It presents best practices, current research on adult learning and literacy, and how research is used by adult basic education teachers, counselors, program administrators, and policymakers. *Focus on Basics* is dedicated to connecting research with practice, to connecting teachers with research and researchers with the reality of the classroom, and by doing so, making adult basic education research more relevant to the field.

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NCSALL

National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy

Welcome to *Focus on Basics*

Dear Readers,

Everyone who works in adult basic education has a story about the student who persevered despite myriad challenges. My favorite story is the class of 25 women on Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), who were studying for both the tests of General Educational Development (GEDs) and their nursing aide certification at the same time. After the first month of the program, I commented on their almost perfect attendance, and one student said, "I bet you didn't expect us all to be here." I told her that no, I didn't. She vowed that they would all be there every month. She was right. The entire class, which had become quite a tight group, graduated. The students had near perfect attendance for nine months of class, 20 hours a week. Since the drop out rate in adult basic education programs tends to be above 50 percent, this was more than remarkable, it was astonishing.

My interest in "persisters" — those who remain in adult basic education programs and meet their educational goals despite the forces acting against them — had begun in the same program three years earlier. I watched one class of students persevere while another class of students with similar socioeconomic make up floundered. What motivates some to persist, while others disappear?

In planning this issue, I sought out people who were consciously grappling with these questions and asked them to write for us. As I read the articles they submitted, each of which presents a different theory or approach to supporting learner motivation, I was struck by the role that community seems to play in all of them. Greg Hart writes that learners and program staff are motivated by even just a taste of the power that community activism can convey. Was it the power, or the sense of community developed during the struggle, or both?

Allan Quigley's research suggests that staff should work quickly to identify those most likely to drop out. He found that one-on-one support and small classes work well. Michael Pritza and his colleagues switched from individualized to small group instruction and saw attendance leap. Moira Lucey observes that the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classroom, where learner persistence is not such a problem, provides a safe haven for learners, a place where friendships are born. Archie Willard identifies the strong relationship his tutor built with him as one key to his on-going motivation as a learner, while Marvin Lewis feels that being involved in the running of his program was a factor in his persistence. While the strategies differ, in each of these examples, a community of learners is being created and, somehow, the motivation that propelled learners to enter programs is sustained.

The drop out rate from adult basic education indicates that we have not managed to find the right mix of strategies to do this consistently. It does seem, however, that we are making progress. We hope that the articles in this issue provide you with ideas that will make a difference.

Sincerely,

Barbara Garner

Barbara Garner
Editor

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Power... *continued from page 1*

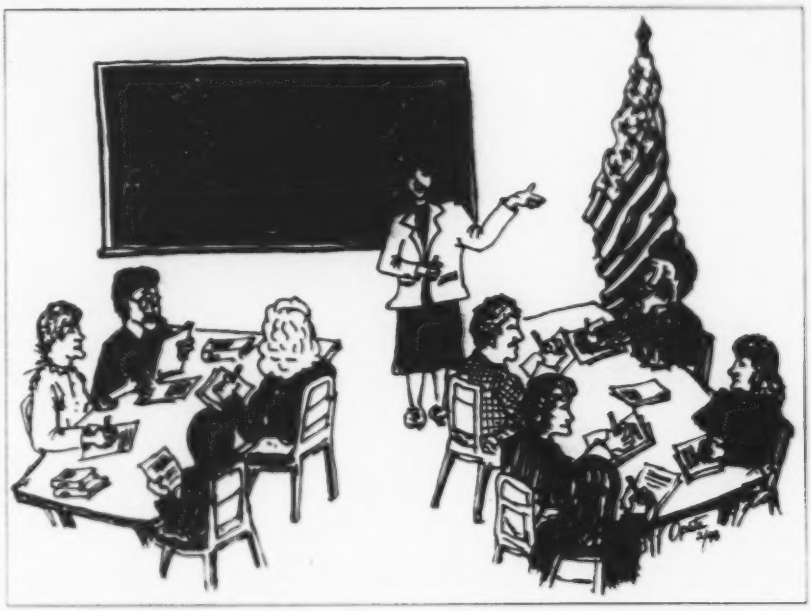
signs, and gave "high fives" all around. The politicians looked out with wonder over the scene until they, too, were engulfed by the thrill loose in the room. A building for adult education was going to be built, for sure, but this jubilation was about more than that. It was about power.

At Pima County Adult Education (PCAE), we have come to believe that literacy is a means to greater power and personal freedom, not an end in itself. It is the prospect of achieving power and not the concept of literacy that truly motivates both students and teachers. Lina Prieto, the other adult education students who had spoken before her, and the audience itself were acting with intent to influence their own destinies and their community. Literacy had helped them to act, but the excitement and satisfaction they felt arose from the knowledge that they were, in those moments, powerful.

My colleagues and I at PCAE have grown weary of working with people desperate to change their lives, only to contend with the fact that from one year to the next about 50 percent of PCAE's 10,000 students drop out before achieving their learning goals. We know that the reasons for that are numerous and complex, and that many are associated with what it means to be poor. We also know that some students leave because what we are able to offer as a program simply doesn't appeal to them. We believe that many students sense what some adult educators already know: that our own status as adult educators relative to other public educational institutions is a mirror image of their own powerlessness. We think that far too many conclude that getting a GED or learning to read at a higher level probably won't change their lives, and, painful as it is to admit, at PCAE we believe they may be right.

An Investment

We held a series of formal and informal meetings and discussions throughout 1992 and 1993, some in the context of a series of day-long staff retreats. As a results, we decided to invest time, energy, and money to introduce the potential for power and civic engagement in an integrated way into our curriculum. We did this to motivate students to use and respect literacy as a tool of action rather than to regard it as a concept unrelated to the reality of their lives and their powerlessness. We also did it to motivate ourselves through deepening our commitment to the meaning and potential of our work as adult educators. The philosophies and practices of Myles Horton, the great plain-speaking American adult educator, and, to a lesser degree, his friend, the great and courageous Paulo Freire, provided fodder for our discussions and models for our actions.



An experience in 1988, when PCAE students and staff staged a large public demonstration that led to a 200 percent increase in funding, had taught us something important: students and adult educators changed when they felt they had some say in their lives. Students involved in planning and organizing the demonstration stayed involved with the program for years, some as paid teaching aides. Teachers involved in and inspired by the powerful impact on themselves and their students grew increasingly discontent with the standard academic, skills-based curriculum that, despite endless tinkering, never seemed to have an impact on attrition levels.

Despite that previous experience, however, we still didn't know how to introduce and sustain ongoing with our students about power. We weren't entirely sure how to identify issues of common concern or how to organize broad-based civic actions and interventions designed to address them, or how we would connect all of that to the adult education classroom. We needed help to proceed. We got it, from the Pima County Interfaith Council (PCIC), an organization associated with the Industrial Areas Foundation

(IAF), founded in the 1940s by the late organizer and radical Saul Alinsky. The PCIC worked originally with faith-based constituencies and a few secular institutions to research issues of importance to the Tucson community, especially those affecting the poor. Some of the issues coming to light based on PCIC's work included lack of child care and transportation, inadequate job training for living-wage jobs, low wages, latch-key children, and the disintegration of families, neighborhoods, and schools. PCIC's lead organizer and I began to meet and form the basis for a working partnership that recognized mutual interests. With PCIC's help and guidance and PCAE's commitment of training, staff time, and leadership — including the creation of the position of Coordinator for Civics and Citizenship — we began to convene forums and one-to-one meetings for students and staff to identify issues affecting their lives.

During these forums and one-to-one meetings, student and staff leaders began to emerge. Issues such as low wages, gang and crime-burdened neighborhoods, and parents' sense of disconnection from their children's schools came to the fore. At times with and at times without teacher guidance, small groups of students began to research issues. Their research included the analysis of public policy documents, the development of effective questions and agendas for meetings with public officials, the preparation of speeches and position papers, and learning how to reach consensus on strategy and conclusions through dialogue. The use of high level literacy skills was, of necessity, essential to all of these tasks. Training for staff and students also included public speaking skills, the mechanics of presenting at large public meetings, and conducting smaller group meetings with public officials and others. In fact, most of these activities were pointed towards meetings with public officials, of which there were eventually many. Student and staff skills were tested and refined during those encounters.

Under the guidance of the Civics and Citizenship Coordinator, six student leaders took paid positions with PCAE as student advocates and student mentors. Their responsibility included, among other things, assisting student councils and identifying other students with leadership potential. Eventually, a core group of about 40 students and staff formed a group called the "Friends and Students of Adult Education." They continue to meet regularly and to take an active and public role in issues of concern to adult education students and adult education in general.

> ***"Human progress does not consist in a few people having control of immense power, but in all people having access to greater opportunities to lead satisfying lives."***
>
> **— Thomas Hines**
> ***Facing Tomorrow***

Staff and student participation in this civic process was and remains a matter of self selection at PCAE. Individuals determine whether or not they want to be involved and their level of involvement. They demonstrate their interest through attendance at meetings and their willingness to volunteer for assignments such as research, meetings with public officials, or disseminating and explaining information to other students and staff. At any given time at PCAE, we may have 25 or so student leaders who are actively involved and a few of hundred who stay informed by attending student council meetings and meetings of the "Friends and Students."

In the beginning of our relationship with PCIC, some of our approximately 170 staff were immediately interested, and others were skeptical. Some of those who were most cautious have since become ardent proponents of civic involvement. Others were ambivalent at the inception, and remain that way to this day. Everyone had questions and concerns: Is this type of civic involvement appropriate for an educational program? Might we lose our funding if we antagonize the powers that be or get caught up in partisan politics? Does PCIC have a hidden religious agenda? Will my job be threatened if I choose not to participate? Today, most teachers appear to be comfortable or are becoming more comfortable with PCAE's efforts to link adult literacy education with the notion of power. Clark Atkinson, a teacher with more than 25 years of varied experience as an adult educator and a strong advocate for teachers' rights, was one of the most dubious at the outset of our involvement. He said recently that he believes that our work with civic engagement has been the most important thing PCAE has ever done.

We have had a number of outward successes based on the issues identified and addressed by

students and staff. They include hosting the candidates for Governor and State Superintendent of Public Instruction in our classrooms, where they were challenged to publicly commit and demonstrate support for adult education.This later materialized into a statewide family literacy initiative. Adult education students played pivotal roles in the development of a city-wide program that nearly doubled the number of after-school programs for elementary-age children. In partnership with teachers, they have formed a non-profit corporation called Adults for Community Transformation (ACT). They confronted powerful local bureaucrats over the placement of a swimming pool at a local neighborhood center instead of a long promised adult education center. Ultimately, they got not one facility, but two. They worked with staff and parents at a troubled high school to create a jobs program for students that is now being lauded and duplicated throughout the city. Hundreds of students studied interviewing skills and participated in a walking canvass of some of the city's more troubled neighborhoods and later helped to present the results to the City Council and the County Board of Supervisors. Working with some of the city's most influential political and business leaders, they have been instrumental in the creation of a new job training strategy that guarantees employer-pledged, living-wage jobs with a career path. In the spring of 1997, students worked with the Board of Supervisors to get $2.25 million included for adult education buildings in a county bond issue. After the bonds passed in a very tight election, 500 attended a County Board of Supervisors meeting in July of 1997 to successfully request that the money be allocated ahead of schedule.

These successes speak for themselves. But what about the impact on students, their learning, and their willingness to stay involved? Skills of involved individuals have certainly grown. Right now, our attrition rate remains about the same, and we report about the same number of student goals achieved as in the past. And, there has been a price to pay: power generates opposition. Former allies, both individuals and institutions, have grown distant and, in some cases, inimical, as they perceive that their interests and their access to resources may be threatened by an active adult education constituency competing for those same resources. The risk is real that in questing for power we might lose some, or, in the worst case, all of our ability to even offer educational programs. We might lose our jobs, too. We also clearly recognize another risk: that we as teachers, i.e., the literate, might exploit students. That possibility requires constant vigilance and introspection. The buildings we have won, for example, cannot just end up being nicer places to work for adult educators; they must serve and strengthen the adult learner community. We must be vigilant also that PCAE itself is not similarly exploited by the IAF or PCIC for their own purposes.

We will not understand the full impact of our work for many years to come. We have shown ourselves that linking literacy education with the notion of power transforms the perspectives and motivations of educators and students alike. We have seen people's lives and the lives of their families change. When GED student Lina Prieto, who questioned city and county officials, speaks powerfully to a room of 2,000 people, she knows she has the ability to influence the direction of her community; she has power. Her seven-year-old son sitting in the audience sees it, too. When teachers see students involved in the civic process, they recognize that they themselves are engaged in meaningful work: they have power. When government officials see that the community they serve has a voice, they see that power belongs rightfully to the people. For the people at PCAE involved in this process, adult literacy education, and power will never rightfully be separate from one another again.

About the Author

Greg Hart is the director of Pima County Adult Education in Tucson, Arizona.

About the Artist

Artist *Jesus Garcia*, originally from Magdalena, Sonora, Mexico, learned English and received his GED at Pima Country Adult Education in the late 1980s. He is currently studying for a degree in ecology and evolutionary biology at the University of Arizona ❖

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Issue A: March 1998

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- Small stipend provided

Contact Information

If you are interested in serving on the board, please contact Barbara Garner at (617) 482-9485.

The First Three Weeks: A Critical Time for Motivation

by B. Allan Quigley

Isn't there anything I can do to keep my students motivated?" This is the question I asked back in 1972, when I lost two students from my first adult basic education (ABE) class. At the time, my reaction was: "I must do better." I tried harder. I searched for more and better materials. I employed the best techniques I could find. I was as supportive as any teacher could be. But, somehow, even with my best efforts, things didn't change much. Some students stayed. Some didn't. I just couldn't get a handle on it. My best wasn't enough.

In the late 1970s, as an ABE program director, my staff and I tried everything we could think of to improve our retention rates. We had full-time, part-time, and drop-in courses. We had block and continuous intake. We had centralized and decentralized classes around the city. We had large individualized classes, team-taught classes, childcare in some, computers in others. Still, even with our best ideas and best efforts, some students dropped out while others persisted. Our collective best still wasn't enough.

Entering doctoral studies in 1984, I believed the books in the library would hold the answers. However, after working on this issue for almost 11 years as a professor and researcher, I still don't have the answer. A quarter century of worrying about the same question is a long time. I nevertheless think the contemporary literature and some of what I have found recently may be taking me closer to a better understanding of how to keep students motivated. While others may disagree, I like to think we are getting closer to answers. Let's see.

Different Perspectives

Looking back, I think neither my excellent co-workers nor I were really able to analyze our world because — and here's the conundrum — we saw it as our world. You might notice in the above story that at no point did my co-workers and I draw upon the perspective of the learners. I think this is a serious self-limiting condition in ABE. As educators, we often seek to reproduce the experiences that worked for us. Most of us basically liked school and succeeded at the schooling process. Educators have a common experience that separates us from our students. The culture of school that we so enjoyed is not necessarily a culture into which our students fit. We must keep that in mind when we design programs and instruction.

Our learners are not a "different species," as some would have us believe (Quigley, 1997), and I must say immediately that I hate the negative stereotypes of our learners. Yet the common characteristics within our learner population, the one that distinguishes it from other populations in the educational spectrum, is that most of our students dropped out of school. Furthermore, most did so under unhappy circumstances. While our learners have many characteristic in common with mainstream adult students, they also have some radical differences. We can certainly learn from theories and research done with the larger adult population in mind, but we cannot extrapolate freely.

A Framework

That said, a model provided by Patricia Cross in 1982 suggests that ABE learners — like all adult learners — must overcome three barriers to enroll and stay in ABE classes. First, ABE learners, like all the rest, must negotiate family, financial, health, transportation, and other problems if they are to come and to stay. These are the situational barriers; they arise out of learners' day-to-day lives. Many researchers have identified and discussed these barriers in ABE (see, for instance, Hayes, 1988; Malicky and Norman, 1994; Wikelund, Reder, & Hart-Landsberg, 1992). Second, ABE learners, like adult learners everywhere, must confront the institutional barriers our agencies seem inevitably to create. Which adult students don't have to deal with some type of institutional red tape, or program fee, or scheduling inconvenience at their learning institutions? Our learners face institutional rules and procedures that too often seem to serve the institution, not the learners. So, when we add up the problems that may cause learners to leave, we can separate some of them into these two categories, situational and institutional.

We can try to help our students with the situations they face by referring them to resources. But we can only refer them, we can't be the resources. Situational barriers are often those about which we in ABE can do very little. This is an area where we need to realize our limitations and reduce the personal guilt we feel when we see our students floundering in the face of these barriers.

Likewise, we can and should keep chipping away at institutional barriers — we do have some control over these — but, again, I don't think this is where we should expend most of our energy. I have become convinced that the third barrier holds the most promise. The third — and most enigmatic by far — is the area of

dispositional barriers. Herein lies the curious inner world of unique attitudes, personal values, and unstated perceptions. Our learners often carry into our programs mixed emotions, many of which are negative, born of past schooling experiences. These may take up more space in their dispositional baggage than we usually want to acknowledge or are willing to explore.

Our students come to our programs with hopes, fears, and expectations, just like other adult learners. But, as I have said, our students' feelings grow from negative schooling experiences. The "answers" we offer may exacerbate the problems they bring. Faced with students who show low self-esteem or an apparent lack of confidence in ABE programs, Fingeret (1985) found that ABE teachers often "try to be all things to each individual student" (p. 112). But, as Fingeret concludes, even the total devotion of a caring teacher in the face of apparent low self-esteem may not be enough. While Fingeret agrees that such "are admirable aspirations it is possible that instructors ... may actually undermine the adult student's ability to use the program as an area for risk-taking, growth, and learning" (p. 112). As Fingeret found: "Many students do not simply remain in a program because it 'feels good' to them. They remain because they see the potential for meeting their goals" (p. 112). I would add, despite the unquestionable value of a caring teacher and learner-centered approaches, these are not the singular answers for retention. If they were, the dropout rate in the U.S. would not have been a staggering 74 percent in the 1993-94 year (U.S. Department of Education, 1995).

I now believe that the gap in perception created by our school-based experiences, when contrasted with those of our students, is a source of serious unseen, under-researched problems. I think that if we can understand dispositional barriers better, if we can see the differences between our dispositions and theirs more clearly, we can become more effective at our tutoring, teaching, counseling, and retention.

Dispositional Barriers

As I noted earlier, schooling experiences in the formative years have a lifelong effect on learners. Cervero and Fitzpatrick (1990) found, through a longitudinal study of 18,000 students from 1,200 U.S. schools, that adults who had been early school-leavers — drop outs — had extremely mixed feelings toward past schooling. Early school leavers participated in credit and non-credit adult education opportunities at a rate well below the norm for mainstream adults who had completed school. The researchers concluded that those who quit school are "shaped ...by a powerful set of social circumstances" (p. 92).

Taking the same point further, Wikelund, Reder, & Hart-Landsberg (1992) found that undereducated adult "participants and potential participants tend to perceive and experience the adult education programs ... as extensions or continuations of the school programs in which they have previously experienced failure, loss of self-esteem, and lack of responsiveness to their personal needs and goals" (p. 4). This is another important conclusion that can help us think more critically about our programs.

In a study I conducted in 1992, we held in-depth interviews with potential students who chose not to attend ABE programs even though they knew they were probably eligible to attend. We found that the terms 'education' and 'learning' were understood positively if applied to the children and the friends of the resisters. These two constructs implied absolute good. When we mentioned 'ABE' or 'literacy' — when we flat out asked if they would go to the local ABE programs and register — they heard 'school.' They said they did not want to "go back to school" although we had never used that word.

Theories of Participation

If we turn to research on the psychological and socio-cultural and socio-economic factors that go into motivation, we come away disappointed. But we have no lack of advice. In the past, our field was advised to address motivation and participation using mainstream adult education models. Boshier (1973), and Rubenson and Hogheim (1978), for instance, have argued that mainstream adult education theories should be used in ABE settings. In 1986, Gordon Darkenwald wrote that

if we would just use such mainstream adult theories "The quality of ABE participation and dropout research would be vastly improved" (p. 12). Maybe, but, given the differences in learner populations, it does not necessarily follow that mainstream adult education research applies to ABE.

Another model we could consider is Miller's 1960's force field analysis (1967), which says that certain influences pull adults towards a desired goal as other influences push them away. In the classic Miller force-field theory, we need to research the forces acting on students via a force-field analysis. Miller's theory is, however, constructed on socio-economic status, ignoring prior education and its effects.

Peter Cookson's (1987) ISSTAL model argues that an individual's social background and roles, combined with a list of other external and internal elements, can act as a series of filters. These either discourage or challenge the learner to the point where she will either engage in further education or choose not to participate. Actually, Patricia Cross (1982, p. 124) had much the same idea in her chain-of-response (COR) model a few years earlier. For Cross, the adult's decision process begins with self-evaluation and moves through a predictable sequence of links. So, according to Cookson and Cross, if we can just know the filters and links in the sequence, we can predict who will participate. Neither Cookson nor Cross explicitly includes the powerful effects of pre-adult factors such as past educational experiences in their equations.

Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) created a model that does allow for several pre-adult influences. Their model takes into consideration eight groups of factors from the prospective learner's experience. This seems relevant until we notice that all types of educational goals and participation are lumped together. Credit-bearing, noncredit-bearing, and variations of both are assumed to be essentially the same, and labeled further adult education. Where does ABE fit into this mix of mainstream goals? Does this theory really do justice to the formative experiences of our learners? More recent research by Roberta Uhland (1995) and researchers at the Center for Literacy Studies (1992) tells us this adult mainstream view of educational attainment can vastly oversimplify the ABE learner's decision process (and see Beder, 1990).

Perhaps the theory that, more than any other, perpetuated stereotyping in ABE was Roger Boshier's congruence model (1973, 1977). It classes all potential participants into growth-oriented and deficiency-oriented learners. Boshier effectively says that low-literate adults are at the rock bottom of any Maslowian hierarchy of needs based on 48 motives. They are so seriously deficiency-oriented in the motives department that it would seem almost impossible for our learners to be motivated at all. As Beder (1990) says, Boshier "perpetuates the very social stigma attached to low literacy which limits life success and reduces motivation" (p. 44).

On the other hand, perhaps the most promising theory for our field from mainstream higher and adult education is the Vroom (1964) expectancy-valence model. It promotes research on two levels of inquiry. First, it asks what the learners' expectations are of the upcoming experience, or program, in this case. Second, it tries to measure the inherent valence — or worth — of a program as the learner sees it. The strength of these two, says Vroom, will determine participation and success. While expectancy-valence theory has been used with some success in our field (e.g., Van Tilburg & DuBois, 1989; Quigley, 1992, 1993), we are not sure how dispositional barriers interact with what learners find in programs. We don't really know how expectancy and valence interacts with dispositional barriers. And note that all of the above are theories of participation. They are asking: "What influences adults to join programs?" They are not explicitly focused on retention: "What influences them to stay or quit?"

The Drop-Out Weeks

We need to go beyond participation theory and find a way to understand what our learners actually experience during the first three critical "drop-out weeks." We do have some understanding of this period, and we have some strategies worth using.

An interesting study by Christophel and Gorham (1995) may be appropriate for us, even though it is based on college students. This study has to do with in-program, not before-program, questions. The researchers found that among young adults in college, motivation "is perceived by students as a personally-owned state, while demotivation is perceived as a teacher-owned problem" (p. 303).

While this finding has yet to be tested in ABE settings, it does make a potentially useful contribution. It introduces the demotivation side of learner experience. And it does square with ABE retention and persistence work (e.g., Bean et al, 1989; Diekhoff & Diekhoff, 1984), which indicates that our learners tend to come to ABE with sufficient motivation to succeed, but things happen that, through their eyes at least, "demotivate" them. It gives us language and a framework to continue the line of reasoning that persistence and motivation are not ultimately "their" problem.

This line of demotivation research also indicates that "motivation is modifiable" (Christophel & Gorham, p. 304). Squaring with the nascent ABE retention research, it suggests that teachers can do something. One positive way intervention can occur,

according to Chrisophel and Gorham, is if teachers respond to student needs right away. They call this teacher-immediacy. As they learned, "teacher immediacy affects motivation." (p. 304). My own research suggests that "nonverbal immediacy relationships are more slowly established than are verbal immediacy relationships" (p. 304). The point here is that early verbal connections with new learners are critical in sustaining motivation.

The value of teacher immediacy was also demonstrated by a study I conducted in 1993. Through in-depth interviews that contrasted persisters with dropouts, two interviewers found that a randomly selected group who had dropped out of an ABE program in the first three weeks due to evident dispositional barriers had chosen not to talk with their teachers about their decision to quit during the decision period. Instead, they had all gone to the intake counselor. One had done do so up to seven separate times prior to dropping out. This is potentially disconcerting for teachers. In contrast, those in the study who persisted for months did not go to the counselor once in the same critical period. Instead, persisters talked to their ABE teachers regularly. Thus, the 'immediacy' role of the intake counselor or intake person may be at least as important as the role of the teachers among the potential dropout population.

Those learners asking for counselor assistance were not the ones who, to the teacher, appeared to need assistance. They were basically invisible in the classrooms. It was the potential persisters who squeaked and seemed to get noticed.

As time goes by, say Christophel and Gorham, the teacher-learner relationship becomes increasingly important in sustaining student motivation. They make it clear that the first few weeks are crucial. If teacher immediacy is not established early, the odds that students will drop out increase. It is imperative that we figure out who needs such attention.

Identification

Most programs have an intake person. It may be a counselor, a teacher, a receptionist, or the program administrator. Research I have done (Quigley, 1997) suggests that some new learners — not all — will need more attention than others, both inside and outside the classroom. I believe it is worth building a sensitive interviewing process for new learners at initial contact, and right after intake, and to use the same personnel to follow up with learners who need more attention. It is also advisable that this person, or persons, not be the same as those actually teaching the learner. As I will explain, some learners may need a safety valve. To make this degree of interview and follow-up manageable, consider ways for staff — not only the teachers — to look systematically for "at-risk indicators" (Quigley & Kuhne, 1997). 'At risk' here means those learners who probably have the highest chance of dropping out in the first few critical weeks by virtue of the dispositional barriers they must overcome. The overall logic here is that some new students have more significant dispositional barriers than others. These 'at-risk' learners can often be identified and assisted to stay in programs longer.

The study we conducted involved 20 at-risk learners and a control group. The intake counselor, a male, looked for body language and verbal cues that suggested dispositional barriers were at work, barriers sufficient to cause the applicant to drop out early on. These cues included skepticism, hostility, hesitancy, and uncertainty. This observation occurred during a meeting at the beginning of the program. The second meeting was the student intake, about two weeks later, during which the counselor once again looked for the same behaviors and attitudes. At this point, if he saw the same behaviors or attitudes, he referred the student to another counselor, a female. She conducted a more in-depth interview with the new learner about her past schooling experiences. Having toured the program by now, the student was asked to compare the past with her future expectations for this program. The Prior Schooling and Self-Perception Inventory, which contrasts aspect of past performance and relations with peers with what the potential learner was anticipating in this program, was created and used for this more lengthy interview (Quigley, 1997, pp. 245- 246).

With these three procedures, we had identified an at-risk group: learners we hypothesized were especially susceptible to demotivators. But now what? Remember how we usually place so much emphasis on a caring teachers' ability to raise self-concept? Other possibilities were tested. Those who now appeared to be at-risk were referred at random to four separate classroom settings. None were aware they were part of a study. The first randomly selected group was referred to the mainstream just like the others that came to the center. This control group was placed among the usual classes of anywhere from 15 to 20 students, taught by one teacher. Another randomly selected group received team support. This meant their teacher was made aware they were at-risk students and the female counselor visited each in this group at least once per week. The counselor and teacher used the Inventory as a baseline to see how the learner was progressing. So, this "team-supported group" received all the support that a teacher and a counselor could possible give within the program's structure. We hypothesized that if caring teachers and counselors are vital to retention, this approach would result in the highest student retention rate. The third randomly selected group went to small classes of five or six students. This option played down the teacher's importance; we

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hypothesized that more peer attention, not just more teacher attention, would have a positive impact on retention. The final randomly selected group were assigned to one-on-one volunteer tutors rather than to a classroom, giving them the most teacher attention one could ever get in ABE.

What happened? All three special treatment groups retained students past three weeks and beyond the control group. Our goal was met. The small group option held the most students the longest. This suggests that increased peer support as well as enhanced teacher support for the at-risk, through the small group setting during the first three weeks, may provide an "absence of negatives" sufficient for many at-risk learners. In all events, any of the three treatments were an improvement over the traditional classroom for the at-risk.

Implications

What does this suggest for program design? First, identify those least likely to stay. The at-risk group should be identified by an experienced intake person in the first one-on-one meeting. These observations should be verified during a second interview, using the Prior Schooling and Self-Perception Inventory (Quigley, 1997). Although using this instrument hardly constitutes scientific prediction, it at least provides a profile based on the new students' own expressed expectations and personal concerns. And it grounds observed behaviors and learner self-perceptions in dispositional barriers. I recommend also using the Witkin Embedded Figures Test (Quigley, 1997; Witkin et al, 1971). This test assesses learners' field dependence and field independence, which, simply put, means levels of needing to belong.

This means making informed judgements early on in programs. Some programs will be able to place the at-risk in classes of five or six students. Some will not. Most programs can have the intake person act as follow-up support to the at-risk by meeting with these students individually at least once a week to go over their progress, using the Inventory as a baseline. The follow-up should include informing the teacher that these students will need more support than others, even if they do not always request it. Finally, the intake person and the teachers can meet and work as a team. In any case, the intake person should be someone other than the teacher so that another interested person is available to the students. This provides a second, less symbolically authoritative figure with whom the at-risk can consult.

Other team support techniques suggest themselves here. Groups within classrooms can be formed to create a smaller peer support group for the at-risk. After-class support groups can be created and the at-risk can be encouraged to attend. Approaches such as mentoring and "buddy systems" can be used with good effect. The idea is to build more support for the at-risk using peers as well as teachers and intake personnel. Finally, many programs can add volunteer tutors to ABE programs, either in or outside of ABE classrooms. The last model tried in the study was to give fuller attention through tutors. It worked better than nothing did. Why not add a tutor to help the at-risk in ABE if this is the approach available?

No one is suggesting that situational and institutional barriers will not creep up on many learners during or after the critical three weeks. We are dealing with adults here. Little is predictable; less is "controllable." But, based on this study and the success of programs that have acted on these same suggestions, we know that we can: 1) understand the time frame in which we must identify the at-risk, 2) identify an at-risk group upon which to focus energy, and 3) employ various groupings found to provide support for the at-risk. Above all, we can at least begin to untangle some of the complex issues of retention and make a better, more informed start. Yes, there is something I can do.

The Answer

If I knew how to enhance motivation, I would have done it 20 years ago. I only wish I had taken the time to question, to analyze, and to be more self-critical in ways that allowed for greater learner input. The efforts of recent researchers, and emerging trends such as action research for the classroom (Quigley & Kuhne, 1997) are positive.

Here are some questions I think we should be asking. What are the differences —dispositional, cognitive, age, gender, and cultural — between those who stay and those who do not? What is the actual process of disengagement? Are there stages of dropout? Do demotivators – especially things done or not done by the teacher – trigger them? What role does learning style play in motivation? And how can we – practitioners, researchers, and learners alike – share and learn from our experiences so that, as a field, we are not reinventing the same disjointed solutions? In my view, just being able to communicate and share ideas through such means as *Focus on Basics* is a major step forward.

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Build Motivation by Building Learner Participation

by Barbara Garner

The Goodwill Learning Center in Seattle is in an enviable position: supported by Goodwill Industries and private grants, it is not dependent upon government funds. The staff are free to experiment. Students suggest courses, and those with special skills teach them to others. The current roster of classes includes traditional topics such as English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), math, reading, writing, and preparation for the tests of General Educational Development (GED). At the students' suggestion, the roster also includes public speaking, passing the written driving exam, small business, and cash English. In cash English, students learn the standard spoken English they need to succeed in the formal economy.

Director Pat Russell-Sims feels that participation motivates students, builds their confidence, and opens them to new vistas. At the Goodwill Learning Center, participation comes in two forms. It can mean being involved with the general running of the school; it can also mean being involved with other students. Learners, who include those studying ESOL and all levels of adult basic education (ABE), participate in hiring staff and in setting organizational policy. The students in each class determine their own rules; for example, students decide whether snacks can be eaten during class, whether children can be brought to class, and whether homework should be given. There's a peer tutoring program, and four of the Center's staff of seven are former students, which indicates that student involvement works.

Despite the Center's commitment to the concept, building student participation isn't easy. A student council started a number of years ago by a small group of active students provided the Center with a way to get student input. The group didn't grow, however, and when the core members graduated, it faltered.

To complement the work of the student council, another group of students started a newsletter. They write, lay out, and circulate the two-page publication. Students get copies in their mailboxes every week or so. It is entitled the *Goodwill Community Learning Center Student Newsletter, News By, For, and About Students*.

To further increase student participation in the overall running of the school, the Learning Center has instituted quarterly all-school meetings for the students. "We thought about calling them 'assemblies,'" explains Marvin Lewis, a former student and now an Americorps volunteer responsible for student involvement, "but assemblies means high school, and lots of people don't like that." To prevent classes from being interrupted, the first two meetings did not coincide with class time. Of approximately 175 students enrolled at the time, about 55 attended each of the first two meetings. They broke up into small groups to generate suggestions about how to improve the Center. Their lists included a request for

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A Learner's Story

by Marvin Lewis

Looking back, my first memories as a learner come from home. There were always books around. Momma and 'Deddy' had the biggest; they were the Bible. My older brother and sisters introduced school books to me. I had good models for early childhood reading and writing. I was read to a lot by all family members. I was well-rooted in reading and writing before I hit kindergarten.

On the first day of school, Dick and Jane was read to the whole class by yours truly. That's only because I learned from my sister. As for forces working against me, well, when you are the only Black person in your class from grades three through six: well, use your imagination. Kids can be mean at times; sometimes it was me. Once you get called a slur you're not really concentrating on the classroom, you're concentrating on retaliating.

I was working at Goodwill Industries when I decided to take classes at Goodwill Community Learning Center. It had been 18 years since I graduated from high school. While working, it hit me that unless I improved my education I would continue to be in dead end jobs since all I had were labor skills. So I started taking classes.

My family and friends were very supportive. They thought it was wonderful. The atmosphere was good. The Learning Center let me work at my own pace. What I liked the most about it was how the students were given the opportunity to have a major say in things.

Then I became a peer teacher. I helped with sharing information, getting information from everyone in the class. I really can't remember how they figured I had an interest in doing this. I think they asked me.

Of course, I got discouraged because it was new to me. But fortunately, a staff person shared with me that discouragement along with frustration is a learning process. As for quitting, it entered my mind, but I was immediately snapped back into reality by looking into my children's eyes.

The advice that I would share with staff and program directors would be this: don't fake the funk. That means don't pretend with the students. We can see right through it.

About the Author

Marvin Lewis is the seventh son of 16 children. His parents moved from Louisiana to Washington in 1952. He is the father of three children and an American Red Cross volunteer in disaster relief. As an Americorps volunteer, he is in his second year as a student organizer at the Goodwill Community Learning Center in Seattle.

child care and more computer classes; the administration is looking into the feasibility of both. Another request, for more ESOL classes, was fulfilled almost immediately.

Not happy with the attendance at all-school meetings, the Learning Center is experimenting with ways to increase it. They're particularly concerned with attracting night students. Now, all school meetings are held during regular class time. The Center will hold two meetings a quarter, one during the day and one in the evening, so students who go to class in the evening can attend. They serve food: donuts, croissants, bagels, fruit, and juice.

To broaden ownership of the meetings, responsibility for facilitation rotates. "A lot of students bring a lot of experience with them — from church or other places," Lewis points out, and the Center runs a public speaking class, so finding students to facilitate isn't hard. Lewis works with the facilitators, helping them prepare for the meeting.

Lewis is an example of a student whose motivation was enhanced by being given the opportunity to participate in the running of his school. He shares his story with us here. He would be the first to admit that, while building learner participation is not easy, it can be effective.

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Staying in a Literacy Program

by Archie Willard

I was 54 years old when I got started in a literacy program. It was one of the hardest things I have ever done. I had struggled all my life with my reading and had been told so many times that I could not learn to read. That had always bothered me. Deep down inside, I thought I could do better than what others had said about me. Getting started in a reading program was one of the best things I have ever done for myself. After my first reading lesson I told myself, "I'm going to try to make a difference in the literacy field."

When I was five years old and started kindergarten I was right in the middle of everything at school. I was eager to learn. Sometime in the first grade when I had my first reading lesson, things changed. I really struggled in that lesson. From then on the teacher's voice seemed different when she talked to me. When the other children in my class did things, I was not included anymore. So, when we had reading class, I just sat down in my seat and tried not to be noticed. I would be so worried about being called on to read that I lost the concentration that I needed as well as the content of the lesson. I lived in fear, thinking I was not good enough to learn how to read. It was not long after that first reading lesson that I gave up on being a formal learner. Then, after time went by, I became angry because I was being left out of the mainstream of life. I didn't want to be an angry person, but it just happened.

I faintly remember that there were some meetings between my mother and someone from the school. But this was the 1930's, and no one understood learning disabilities then. If you were not learning to read, you were looked at as a dummy. My mother could not read very well and she could not help me with my school work. As I look at my dyslexia and my symptoms I can see some of these same symptoms in my mother's life. I now feel that she must have been dyslexic, too. My father could read quite well but he was a conductor on the Chicago Northwestern Railroad and he worked ten to 12 hours a day, sometimes seven days a week. He did not have the time or energy to help me. My parents were kind to me and encouraged me to do the best that I could do in school. There was a lot of love in our home and it was a place where I could escape from all the frustration at school.

My teacher placed me in the back of the room away from the rest of the students. I was in a room full of other students, but I felt like I was there all alone. I was passed from grade to grade. I graduated from high school, and because I did well in football I attended college and I played football there for two years. Then I was told that I could no longer stay in school because my grades were not good enough. When I left school, I took a lot of frustration and anger with me.

I then went to work for Hormel Packing Company. I worked with my hands and did not need to know how to read. I married, and my wife and I had one child, a daughter. Hormel was a good company to work for and my family got along fine financially. I worked there for 31 years until the plant closed and I received early retirement.

One day in 1984, my wife read a newspaper article about Bruce Jenner, who had won a gold medal in the 1976 Olympics. The article told about his athletic achievements, but it also told about his being dyslexic. My wife suggested that the "symptoms" of dyslexia that Bruce Jenner exhibited could have been a description of me. That story started me thinking that maybe I had a learning disability. Maybe I wasn't a dummy, after all, as I had been told so many times at school! I was motivated to be tested to see if I had a learning disability. I then went to the University of Iowa Hospitals and was diagnosed as having dyslexia. I was elated to finally know that there was a reason why I had struggled to learn to read.

I decided that I was going to seek reading help and, at age 54, enrolled in an adult reading program at Iowa Central Community College to make changes in my life and to try again. I wanted a quick fix. I hoped that I could learn to read in three to six weeks, then leave the program and never look back. Of course it never happened that way. It had been 34 years since I had been in school and it was hard to get over the hump and get started again. After the experiences from my school years, I came into the program with a lot of frustration and was defensive. I would rather be looked at as someone who didn't care about learning to read than someone who cannot learn to read. Until I saw the program and tutor as non-threatening, I could not start learning to read again.

My tutor was a retired adult basic education program administrator. She had never tutored anyone before. She worked with me from her heart. She was not going to let me get out of this program without teaching me to read. She asked me to do reading outside

Archie Willard

of class. I did not want to be seen at the public library getting books that were at my reading level, so I read 26 Nancy Drew books which my daughter had collected when she was a young girl.

My tutor had an ability to look at me and see the little things that could keep me going in the program. We started each lesson talking about things that had happened in the world since our last lesson. Sometimes we would read from the newspaper to help in our discussion. She helped involve me in what was happening in our community. Every second Thursday, the public library held noon programs with presentations about various topics. After our lesson on those days, she and I would take sack lunches and go to these presentations. My tutor became someone I could call "friend." Because of this friendship, I felt comfortable in this reading program and I wanted to work harder to improve my reading.

One of the most important things my tutor did for me was to enable me to function in my new job. Although I had received early retirement from Hormel Packing Company, this retirement pay was not going to keep a family of three going without some supplemental income. I still needed to work. It was hard to find a job for someone over 50 who couldn't read. I feel that because my wife helped fill out my application and I did well in my interview, I got a job as an insurance adjuster with Farmers Mutual Hail Insurance Company. This job was extremely hard for me to do, but my tutor helped me learn how to spell words that were used in insurance. We practiced writing insurance reports. Because of her help I was able to work for this company for 14 years.

About a year after I got into my reading program, when I was ready to do more, my tutor got me involved in other parts of the program. I did public speaking, I told my life story to schools, I was on the advisory board for the reading program, I went to a support group, I helped plan the first Iowa State Literacy Congress, and I grew from all this. All of this involvement also helped me to keep going. I began to feel good about what I was doing. The more I reached out, the more confidence I gained. I became open about having dyslexia.

My tutor then encouraged me to find out more about my learning disability, dyslexia. I attended an Iowa State Orton Dyslexia Conference. I learned that 70 to 80 percent of the adults who seek reading help have some kind of a learning disability. I went to more conferences to learn more, and began meeting and networking with people who were professionals in the learning disability field. I heard researcher Dr. Albert Galberta tell about his work and how cells (ectopic cells) get misplaced in the development of the brains of dyslexics, which causes us to have processing problems. Again, I subconsciously heard, "You are not a dummy! You can learn, but you learn differently."

I stayed in my reading program for two and a half years. Many things kept me going. Initially, perhaps the most important motivation to me was that I wanted to prove to myself and the rest of the world that I was not a dummy. This motivation led to learning which led to more motivation to learn more.... Somehow I got a spark in my life and I became a formal learner again. Another thing that helped me was to stand up and say, "I'm an adult learner." This forced me to set standards for myself because others were watching me as an adult who was learning to read. My wonderful tutor, my understanding of dyslexia, my involvement in literacy issues, the discovery of who I am, were some of the things that motivated me. The chemistry in my home helped to keep me going. I got all the encouragement and support I could want from my wife and daughter who was a senior in high school at the time. I knew that had I not sought reading help, my family would have been very disappointed. My learning to read was so important to my daughter, that when she went off to college at the University of Iowa, she became a volunteer tutor to teach adults to read at nearby Kirkwood Community College. She then organized other college students to become tutors and they helped other adults to read.

Twelve years have passed. I am not an adult literacy student anymore, but I continue to learn. I have kept up on what the latest research has found in the field of learning disabilities. I have traveled many miles advocating for literacy. I have attended Individual Educational Plan meetings at the request of parents. I'm on three different literacy boards. I have continued to do public speaking about adult literacy and about dyslexia. This has taken me to schools, universities, national

conferences, and churches. I have had the opportunity to go to Eastern Europe in 1993 and in 1995 to study how learning disabilities are dealt with there. I now work as an adult literacy coordinator for Iowa Central Community College in Fort Dodge, Iowa. Each fall I teach an adult education class at several Iowa community colleges about understanding learning disabilities. In 1996 I completed a fellowship with The National Institute for Literacy.

Last summer, five other adult learners and I organized and conducted a leadership workshop for adult learners at Illinois State University. The six of us are now working with mentors to plan a March 1998 meeting at the Highlander Retreat near Knoxville, Tennessee, to form an adult learner national organization. I have a passion to bring adult learners together and to help them find themselves in life and to continue to make a difference in literacy.

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Stopping Out, Not Dropping Out

Students and teachers may perceive withdrawing from a program differently

by Alisa Belzer

To plan this issue, I read many research studies, some quantitative, some qualitative, some teacher research, others done by academics. Alisa Belzer's examination of the process that learners go through in deciding to stay or leave a program and the many factors that influence them presented many findings worthy of discussion, but one in particular intrigued me. She found that some students who were defined as "drop outs" by their literacy programs did not consider themselves as such. This difference in perception can have strong implications for the services we deliver. I asked Alisa to share this aspect of her research with us. — Barbara Garner

When I was teaching and students stopped coming to class or to tutoring sessions, I never really knew quite what to think. Sometimes I blamed myself: "If only I were a better teacher." Sometimes I felt angry at the student. "If only she could get her life together." And sometimes I offered myself a structural interpretation related to the challenges that learners face: "No wonder she can't keep coming, look at what she is contending with...." In fact, I really couldn't explain it.

In 1991, I had the opportunity to lead a systematic exploration of the issue.[1] Although I did not conduct the study in my own classroom, the questions I asked and methods I used grew out of my experiences as a teacher and coordinator as well as those of my colleagues in a large, urban literacy program.

It seemed unlikely to me that a learner left or stayed in a program based on any one factor. It seemed more likely that a feeling or attitude about leaving the program developed and a decision got made over time. I designed a study aimed at understanding this complex process better. I was particularly interested in the interaction between the expectations learners brought to a program, their life experiences, and what the program had to offer. I gathered data on the expectations the learners brought, obstacles they and their teachers and tutors encountered, ways in which learners and teachers perceived staying in or leaving a program, and the strategies teachers and tutors employed to promote retention in the program.

One of the assumptions I had, which this article will focus on, was that if students feel badly about leaving a program, it may be difficult for them to return at a later date. This raised the question: How do students feel about leaving? In gathering and analyzing data, I focused in on this issue.

Sample

To carry out the study, I used qualitative research methods to gain multiple perspectives on the process of participation in an adult literacy program from the point of view of learners, staff, and tutors over time. Four educators — two teachers and two volunteer tutor coordinators —

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randomly recruited two to three learners each to participate in the study. The only criteria for selection that they used were that the learners have phones and be willing to be interviewed. The group of students consisted of five individuals participating in three different classes and five individuals receiving tutoring in two different areas of the city. Beyond stratifying for type of learning context, the sample was one of convenience.

Process

The study followed ten students from entry into the program for up to four months or until they dropped out. A former staff member and I gathered the data. We planned periodic contact in the form of face-to-face or telephone interviews with students, as well as with their teachers for those in classes, and with the tutors and coordinators of those receiving tutoring, conducting a total of 102 interviews. The ten students were interviewed 47 times, the four volunteer tutors — one tutor became inactive almost immediately after the study began — were interviewed 19 times, and teachers and coordinators were interviewed 36 times. One tutor remained active in the program only briefly and did not make himself available for an interview. Of the ten adult learners who participated in the study, five of them were still participating regularly in the program at the end of the study.

Perceptions of Stopping

When students stop coming to a program, how do they perceive this action? This was one of the questions in which I was interested. We were surprised to find that the students who left the program did not seem to consider themselves "drop outs." No one would go so far as to say that she had quit the program. Each of those who left planned to return in the future. While they had stopped coming, their intentions to participate had not ended. Although they did not necessarily know when they would be able to return, they all believed it would be possible and desirable to do so. Of perhaps even greater importance to me was that no one expressed a sense of personal failure because of leaving the program. Rather, each simply felt that it was no longer possible for them to continue at that time. They attributed this to factors beyond their control — a job, health problems, financial problems, legal problems, or other personal and family problems that would have to solve themselves.

This raises questions for educators who work hard to help learners avoid a feeling of failure. For the most part, the learners we interviewed who stopped coming neither felt they had failed, nor did they feel the program had failed. Instead, they communicated a feeling that the circumstances of their lives had made it impossible to continue.

The learners' sense that they have little or no control over circumstances seems in some ways destructive. It implies to me a certain sense of powerlessness and suggests that these learners, at least, may feel unable to get around obstacles not necessarily insurmountable to others. It is also, however, a protective stance. It means that students can leave a program without feeling bad about themselves for being "drop-outs." This, in turn, seems to leave the door open for a return to the program in the future. The fact that nine out of the ten adults in the study had participated in some kind of adult education at least once before and chosen to begin anew seems to bear this assumption out.

Students expressed the belief that they have not "completed" the program until they reached their goals. Yet, stopping periodically was not viewed as quitting. Most focussed on what they had been able to accomplish during their time in the program, however brief. For example, one student, who had stopped for health reasons, reported that after her time in the program, she was doing

Gee... Between work and the kids, I don't think I can finish this class! But I'll be back next fall for sure!
I try my best to motivate and encourage these students... but there are always some dropouts!
... Is it me?

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more reading and comprehending better. "I feel good about myself...I'm accomplishing something," she said. Another student who remained in the program throughout the study stated that had she been forced to drop out, she would not have felt like a failure. Rather, she would feel good about the fact that she had made the effort and "I would just go to class the next year or to some other class." A student who was re-entering the program for the third time when the study began explained that she had never felt like a failure when she left in the past because she always knew that she would return. She believed that this in-and-out pattern of participation would serve her until she is able to reach her goals.

Two students did admit that if they quit, they would feel unhappy. One said, "If I quit, I wouldn't like myself. This time I'd rather finish all the way." The other said that if she dropped out she "would feel blue for a while." Fortunately both of these students persisted despite severe obstacles.

Implications

If one agrees with the study participants' perceptions that departure from a program should not necessarily be viewed as a failure, but rather as a temporary hiatus, the question then arises: what implications does this have for programs? Teachers and tutors could make sure that students have materials they can work on outside of class or tutoring; they should also ensure that learners know how to use those materials. Program staff could emphasize life-long learning skills, such as encouraging the habit of reading and writing every day, so that students continue practicing their literacy skills when they are unable to attend. In addition, programs might want to consider printing and distributing class lists for students to encourage contact between students outside of class. On a broader scale, teachers and program managers should plan their program structures, curricula, and assessment procedures on the assumption that even under the best of circumstances, students will come and go, and, hopefully, come again.

Many of the other findings from this study, not detailed here, affirm the notion that attempts to increase retention based on a cause and effect explanation, to frame the issue in terms of single differentiated obstacles, or to assume that decisions around dropping out come at a single point in time, are missing out on much of the complexity of the issue. The question of how to improve student retention cannot be solved with simple or single answers. The same obstacles or supports can create different outcomes for different students. Since often many complicated and interrelated factors are involved in the decision to continue participation in a program, a simple or single solution may make no difference. It is, however, still useful to try to identify potential obstacles, whether they arise during the recruitment and enrollment phase or as a student participates in a program, and to seek strategies that can help retention.

The sample size of this study was small and the time for data collection was relatively short. As with all qualitative studies, the findings here are not necessarily generalizable to an entire population. Rather, they are meant to be suggestive and provocative. I am hoping that this study can help practitioners reconsider a familiar problem in a new way and that it can help clarify understandings of a complex issue through learning about the perspectives of a small group of students and the literacy practitioners with whom they worked. It can neither provide the field with definitive answers of how to cure retention problems nor suggest how to motivate all students. It can help us to think hard about how we formulate programs, curricula, and learning contexts that best respond to the realities of adult learners' lives.

Other Questions

Many retention questions remain to be investigated, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Although this study has strongly suggested that no single answers to improving retention exist, data on various program factors would certainly aid programs in their efforts. Here are some of the questions in which I am interested. Is there a relationship between tutor or teacher retention and student retention? Do students participating in classes, on average, have retention rates different than those who participate in one-to-one tutoring? What happens to students when they leave the program? Do they go to other programs? How often do they return? How long do they stay away? How do the retention rates of open-entry open-exit programs compare with programs that use semester systems, and what does that suggest?

Programs might develop their own questions about retention and use their investigations as a way to help them develop retention strategies and set policy. They should also think about how to best structure themselves to address reality: some students will always be coming and going.

Endnote

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About the Author

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Where Attendance is Not a Problem

Some thoughts on why ESOL students often persist despite considerable obstacles

by Moira Lucey

According to a U.S. Department of Education national evaluation of federally-supported adult education programs completed in 1994, enrollment numbers and class sizes tend to be larger in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) programs than in adult basic education (ABE) and adult secondary education (ASE) (Fitzgerald, 1995). In addition, students enrolled in ESOL classes receive an average of 113 hours of instruction before leaving a program, which is three to four times more hours of instruction than students leaving ABE or ASE get. As a result of the high level of participation in ESOL classes, the study found improved basic skills, literacy skill, and employability in learners.

Why are participation and retention rates higher in ESOL than in ABE or ASE classes? What motivates an adult to attend ESOL classes? I can only respond to these questions by first reflecting on our ESOL program at the International Institute of Boston and on my experience with ESOL learners.

As is typical in many adult education programs, at the International Institute of Boston we end each term with a ceremony. It is always the same. Students, teachers, and other staff fill a room. Brief speeches are made. Those students finishing our highest level class are handed diplomas. Those who got full time jobs but still come to class every day are applauded. Attendance certificates are handed out. As names are read, those who had perfect attendance rise. Then those who missed only one day stand. Those who will be returning next term sit in the audience looking pleased that they are able to come back. They come from many countries and backgrounds. They are all ages and sizes.

Each semester, year after year, I continue to be amazed as I address the group. I see students busily snapping pictures of the graduates, groups of friends, and teachers. I hear those students who are completing our highest level class approach their teachers, begging for permission to enroll class for just one more term. I look into the eyes of those who have full-time jobs but still manage to attend class 15 hours a week. I observe the groups of newly formed friends sitting together, laughing and sharing stories and food. I think of what it really takes for adults to embark on the process of learning a new language and literacy and what is at stake if they do not learn to function in English at some level. I marvel at the fact that the vast majority of these students have studied well beyond the national average of 113 hours of instruction before leaving our program. The main reason why students from our ESOL classes do not complete a term is most often job related; it's rarely related to motivation.

For ESOL students, improved English language and literacy skills are not the only reason for participating in a program. ESOL classes provide the key to understanding more about how to operate in American culture. They give students the opportunity not only to practice language but to learn why something is said or how language changes in a given cultural context. Students learn what to say or not say on a job interview or how to make a doctor's appointment for a sick child. Students share experiences with each other. As they gain language skills and a better understanding of America, their ability to function more effectively in their communities, workplaces, and neighborhoods increases.

> *"ESOL classes provide the key to understanding more about ... American culture."*

Having the freedom to attend school is a privilege for some learners, one that may not have been offered them in their native countries. Whether it is a young man denied entrance to college because of the political affiliations of his family or a woman who was never permitted to go to school because women in her country did not attend school, these students are determined to learn. This is their opportunity.

ESOL programs provide learners

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with a chance to interact with other adults who may have similar life experiences, come from the same country, or are facing the same challenges. Students, especially those who have recently come to the U.S., are often separated from friends and family. Class is a place to make new friends. The social isolation many ESOL learners feel because of their inability to communicate with neighbors or co-workers in English lessens as friendships form and networks develop.

Of the ESOL students surveyed in the U.S. Department of Education's national evaluation, 92 percent said that they read well or very well in their native languages. Half of the ESOL students had completed at least high school Unlike many of the students enrolled in ABE or General Educational Development (GED) classes, ESOL students have not necessarily had failure experiences prior to enrolling in a program. They may be well educated and speak more than one language. They enter programs with excitement. That, in turn, contributes to their ability to learn English. For most, studying ESOL carries no stigma: it is not looked at as remedial education. Even if ESOL students have little or no formal education in their native countries, we often see a high level of motivation to learn English and basic English literacy. In fact, these learners often stay in our ESOL classes for a year or more, attending regularly.

External factors can also influence students' participation in a program. Whether it is an employer who is recommending class attendance or a worker from the welfare department, expectations and requirements may, if met, result in a reward. For students on public assistance, it is cash and food stamps, medical assistance and child care. For students whose bosses have requested that they enroll in ESOL classes, it can be better positions or maintaining current jobs. Many students acknowledge the need to improve their English language and literacy skills for their jobs. That is why they come to class.

Certainly the quality of a program influences attendance and retention rates. Support services, especially bilingual support, allow programs to more effectively and comprehensively reach out to adult populations with needs that may go beyond education. Flexibility and options in scheduling allow students unable to continue in a daytime class, for example, to attend an evening class. The quality of the teaching staff is also critical. Massachusetts now has a number of masters-level ESOL teacher training programs producing well-trained teachers. This, combined with resources from the state allocated to training and professional development, helps us recruit and support talented teachers.

While many of our students show impressive attendance and retention rates, I do not want to ignore the fact that some students do not complete a semester. As with all adult learners, our students have other roles and responsibilities. Some situations necessitate dropping out: lack of child care, health problems, a move to another area, and employer demands are the most common. Factors that relate to the program also cause learners to disappear. If the class schedule is inconvenient or the goal of the learner and the program differ, students may leave. But even if a learner drops out, the motivation to learn often remains in the form of an intent to continue studying when the time is right. It is this motivation and determination to learn that characterizes the adult ESOL learner, and it is also what keeps so many of us working in the field from "dropping out."

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About the Author

Currently working as Director of Programs at the International Institute of Boston, *Moira Lucey* has extensive experience in adult education. She has taught, planned, and administered both ESOL and literacy programs in the U.S. and abroad. She was one of the authors of the teacher handbook *Preventive Mental Health in the ESL Classroom*, and is currently involved in the development of a citizenship education program at the International Institute.

Getting into Groups

In Gilmer County, Georgia, a shift from individualized instruction to classes and group discussion increased student retention and participation

by Michael Pritza

I am an instructor at the Gilmer County Adult Learning Center in Ellijay, Georgia. Gilmer county lies at the southern end of the Appalachian Mountains in the extreme north and central part of the state. Like many rural counties, Gilmer, once relatively isolated, is rapidly becoming a satellite community of a major urban area, in this case, Atlanta. Our students are a diverse group in terms of age and academic development; the youngest is 16, the oldest is 92. They range from non-readers to those who have completed the tests of General Educational Development (GED) and are studying for entrance to technical school or community college. With the exception of a dozen or so currently enrolled Hispanic students, all are Caucasians in the middle- to low-income brackets. Women outnumber men by about five to one.

Like many others in the field of adult basic education, my colleague, Art LaChance, and I were concerned with student retention. Our drop out rate was consistently about 34 percent. About ten percent of these would enthusiastically enroll, but never return. A larger number began well but their attendance gradually tapered off until they finally disappeared without notice or explanation. A surprising number, perhaps another ten to 15 percent, were within easy reach of their goals when they suddenly and inexplicably left the program. Follow- up calls to these students did not yield results. We both felt personally and professionally frustrated by our apparent inability to keep these students engaged for the full course of the program. We knew that they were falling short of their goals, and we felt a lack of effectiveness as an organization. We wondered if we could do anything to change this pattern, or whether it was an unalterable fact of adult education. We had never looked at the problem critically, however, until we participated in a practitioner inquiry project sponsored by the University of Georgia's Department of Adult and Continuing Education in Athens. It was with this project that we really began to consider the possible causes for such high numbers of dropouts.

We began by brainstorming ideas about what we could do to increase retention. Would different methods of intake or the creation of a weekly student orientation affect retention rates? Would awards and certificates of level completion have an impact? What about asking our students about the kinds of study and activity they preferred? We wondered about creating regularly scheduled classes in reading, writing, or math, which we didn't have at the time, or starting discussion groups based on current events. We had success with some team building and discussion-prompting activities in the past, so this idea seemed to have merit.

We then considered our students. All of them were influenced by variables over which we had no control: problems with family, money, illness, transportation, child care, and the like. Many of them told us that they had never seen education as a necessity. Even in the face of recent industry lay offs or the inability to find work, many still saw education as irrelevant. "Why," they asked, "do we have to know this stuff?"

As I mentioned, we had been offering individualized, self-paced study with instructor assistance and self-directed computer-based programs. We began to wonder whether these methods were contributing to our high attrition rate. Students had liked the few group activities we had led. Perhaps a more successful method would include greater participation from both students and instructors alike. This hunch began to take precedence over other ideas. We eliminated most of our other questions and focused on

"All of them were influenced by variables over which we had no control: problems with family, money, illness, transportation, child care..."

the issue of participation. Our research question became: Will group participation in structured classes and discussion groups increase student motivation and retention?

The first step in our investigation was straightforward. We asked our students to respond to a simple questionnaire about the possible instructional approaches we could use at the Center. Choices included individual study with either text materials or interactive computer programs such as PLATO (which we were already doing), study in pairs, or group study in a classroom environment. The groups would focus on language, math, and writing skills. More than 85 percent of about 50 students answered that they would prefer studying together as a group.

Student Input

We then interviewed students in more depth to determine at what point and in which subjects they felt they most needed help. We began to hold loosely organized classes two or three times a week based on the needs of the greatest number of students. We included students at all levels and left attendance to their discretion, rather than making it mandatory. Since we have two instructors, one of us was always available to those students who preferred to work individually.

Classes were at first informal and unscheduled. We would simply move around the Center and ask "Who wants to do class?" and get together for an hour or so, creating a lesson from whatever students were working on at the time. As we progressed, the classes became more structured and scheduled, though during the span of the project we were careful not to make these sessions seem unnecessarily academic or authoritarian. We did not want to re-stimulate negative past

experiences, and we considered student feedback and participation to be two of the most important elements. We also began discussion groups based on topics selected by the students and on exercises from "Beyond Basic Skills," a newsletter of classroom ideas published by the University of Georgia. These groups provided a place in which the students could talk about issues they felt were relevant to their lives, like work and personal finance. In these forums, they questioned the relevance of education, asking "How is education going to improve the quality of my life?" and "How can my life improve by learning percents and geometry?"

Hard Questions

Sometimes answering these questions was hard. During our project, I kept a log of my observations and reflections. The log entries seem to be most useful in shedding light on recurrent themes about student needs and observations. In reviewing the log entries, I discovered the importance of making material relevant to students' lives. "Today," I wrote in my log, "Linda and Troy [names have been changed] asked why they have to learn this stuff. 'Can we make more money?' If I say 'No, but your quality of life will improve,' they ask really hard questions: 'How would my life improve without more money?' There seem to be very few students who will buy the academic reasoning."

As part of our inquiry project, we turned to attendance records for data, extracting the cumulative monthly hours of all students who were not mandated to attend and comparing them to hours of attendance in the months before the project began. The data are displayed in Figures 1 and 2, found on page 22. We were struck by the fact that the average number of attendance hours for non-mandated students had increased about 50 percent during the project. At first we were skeptical about such a large increase, but a review of attendance records showed the data to be correct.

Art and I interpret this data to be an indication of the success of our project, and because of this we have

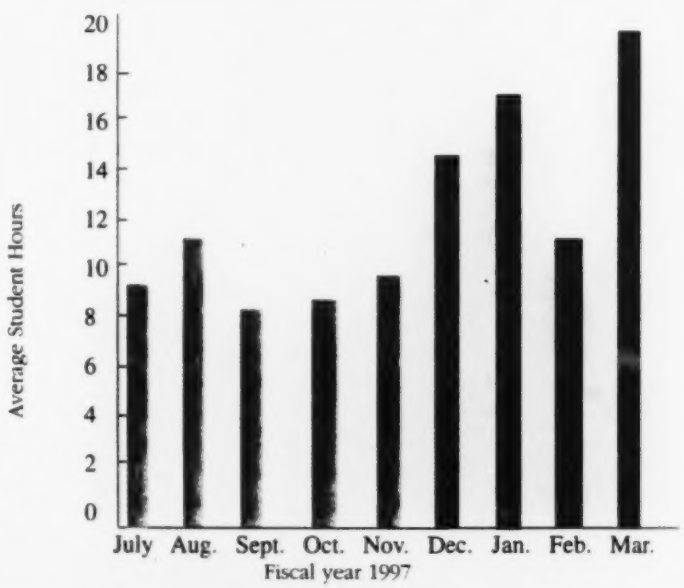
Figure 1: The Numbers of Students and Total Hours of Student Attendance for Fiscal Year 1997. Our project was in effect from December through March. During February, no groups were held. The hours are for non-mandatory ABE students only.

Fiscal Year 1997	July	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.
Total Number of Students	46	55	71	71	41	21	45	50	50
Total Student Hours	423.5	632.75	572.25	604.25	394.75	299.25	726.0	448.25	770.0

incorporated group classes and discussion into our present methods of instruction and curriculum presentation with some real success. Classes are full and students actually make time to include them in their daily schedules. Both the classes and the discussion groups generate energy and enthusiasm in the students, which leads to greater participation and time spent in the program. Participation, especially in the discussion groups, is open to all students, making the classes multi-level. This exposes many of the learners to ideas and subject matter that they would not otherwise encounter and fosters student interaction. It seems to spark in some of our beginning ABE students a desire to participate further: they say they feel good about "going to class." We have noticed that class participation seems to foster study groups, with more advanced students often helping those who are less far along. Because of this, students actually seem to be spending more time involved in their studies.

Of course, this study also created some new problems and challenges. We need to recognize that many factors which influence motivation and retention are probably beyond our influence, and so concentrate on those that we feel we can help to change. As instructors, we realize that we should constantly remain open to change and to restructuring our methods of approach according to the needs of the students, both as a group and as individuals. What works one time, with one group, may not necessarily work the next. Certain constants, such as the need for relevant content, may be extrapolated from our daily work, but the solutions to the problems we encounter may vary from time to time and group to group. This has led us to believe that there is no single solution to the problems of retention and motivation, but many solutions must be applied according to the demands of the time and the needs of the students.

Figure 2: The Average Student Hours for Fiscal Year 1997. Project was in effect from December through March. During February, no groups were held. The hours are for non-mandated ABE students only.



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About the Author

Michael Pritza began work in adult literacy as a volunteer with the Gilmer County Reading Program in 1992. In 1993, he accepted a position with the program, where he now serves as an ABE/GED instructor. Pritza has been involved in practitioner inquiry research since 1995, and is currently working on a degree in Alternatives in Education from Skidmore College in New York.

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research

Learner Motivation

"We're trying to get a picture of the complex set of obstacles and supports that students have as they attempt to persist in a program," explains Dr. John Comings, the director of the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) and principal investigator of the NCSALL study on learner motivation. "We will use that information to design an intervention that we think will help students persist, and then test out the efficacy of that intervention using traditional experimental research methods."

NCSALL has embarked on a multi-phase research process involving innovative and traditional qualitative research and traditional quantitative research techniques to better understand learner motivation and apply that knowledge to the classroom. The non-traditional aspects of the project grew out of research assistant Andrea Parrella's teaching experience. Her students had trouble answering in-depth questions "cold." They needed a chance to reflect before they could produce substantive answers. She felt that the same might be true for participants in this study, so the research team designed an activity that involves potential research study participants in exploring a topic similar to the research topic to "warm them up" before the research interview. By participating in this activity, research participants also get some exposure to the interview team, and are thus more comfortable talking with them during the interviews.

Comings and his team weighed the value of doing this activity as part of their research. "There's a fine line between leading participants and helping them to think more deeply about the question," he says. They wanted to be sure they would have a rich set of responses, and built in checks and balances to ensure that they would be getting valid data.

This activity is only one small part of the project. Following the activity, Parrella and research assistant Chaunda Scott conduct 30-minute one-on-one interviews; they are planning to do a total of 200 at 18 sites around New England. During the interviews, they ask learners to discuss the forces acting upon them three times, in three different ways, to ensure that they are getting an accurate picture. They will return four months later and re-interview the participants to see if the supports they have and obstacles they face have changed.

The research team will use this data to give them a picture of the major forces acting for and against learner persistence. They will then design a classroom activity or set of activities that they feel will help learners to understand these forces and balance them. This activity will be tested using a traditional experimental control model with random assignment. In other words, students will be randomly assigned to classes that use the same curriculum; the main difference between the classes is that in some the teacher will use the motivation-enhancing activity and in others — the control groups — the teacher won't. The persistence of the two sets of learners will be compared. By using this design, the effect — which the researchers hope will be stronger motivation — can be attributed to the intervention rather than some other variable.

Researchers take into account substantive and financial issues when choosing a sample upon which to focus. This team is looking at adult basic education learners who have reading levels on the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) that fall between grades five and eight. They chose this level because they felt that students reading below it may have different motivational issues that relate to learning disabilities. General Educational Development (GED) students were eliminated because many would have completed their tests and graduated before the research team did follow up interviews, creating logistical problems. The team did not include English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) students because of limited resources: in this type of study, ESOL students should be interviewed in their native languages, an expensive prospect. The sample includes learners who range from the age of 16 to 70, it's divided about evenly between men and women, and the learners are white, black, Latino, Portuguese, and Haitian. Learners come from both rural and urban programs.

For more on this study, contact Andrea Parrella at Harvard Graduate School of Education, NCSALL, Nichols House, Cambridge, MA 02138-3572; phone: (617) 495-1712; and e-mail: parrelan@hugse1.harvard.edu.

— by Barbara Garner

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Resources on Learner Motivation

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